

Thursday

January 20, 2005

RIVER OAKS

Examiner

Looscan Library on schedule

By SARAH WILLIAMS
Staff Writer

Plans for the new Houston Public Library Looscan Branch are moving along swiftly, city of Houston officials say.

Recently, the Friends of Neighborhood Libraries, the grassroots fund-raising organization that fought to keep the new library at the same location as the old one, deeded a large tract of land to the city for the proposed facility at 2510 Willowick.

"We're right on schedule," said Houston City Councilwoman Pam Holm, who was instrumental in getting city support for the project.

see LOOSCAN, page 15

Looscan from page 1

When completed, the 22,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art library in the River Oaks area will replace the still-functioning old one, which will be demolished. It was one of Houston's first eight branch libraries, and its replacement will mark the first major improvement at the site in more than 50 years.

Last year, thanks to an aggressive fund-raising campaign, the Friends purchased an 11,000-square-foot lot that neighbors the library's present site for \$1 million, ensuring that the community's beloved Looscan branch would remain on Willowick.

In September, the City Council approved \$3.5 million to build the new facility.

The next step, said city officials, is to determine which architect and contractor will handle the project. It will be bid as "design-build," which means an architect and contractor will team up to submit a bid to the city.

"Typically with the city, we like to bid the design work first and then go out for a second bid for the construction," said Terence Fontaine, deputy chief of staff to Mayor Bill White. "But because this particular project was so near and dear to the hearts of the citizens, and to facilitate (it for) the constituents of River Oaks, we decided to do it all in one bid."

The city recently collected Request for Qualification documents, which basically tell the city who's interested in the project, from various architect and contractor teams. Fourteen teams submitted documents by the city's deadline, said Fontaine, who describes the documents as a sort of a "resume" for the applicants. The documents do not include a design proposal, he said.

A five-person committee will

whittle the applicants to a short list, and then a final team will be selected.

"Hopefully it will be a clear-cut choice," Fontaine said. "Then we will start negotiating."

He said it is too early to say when construction might begin, but Holm, who frequented Looscan as a little girl, said she is hopeful it could begin before the end of the year.

Meanwhile, a fund-raising effort continues by Friends of Neighborhood Libraries to raise \$1 million-plus to furnish the interior of the library.

Preliminary plans call for an Internet café — the library will feature wireless Web access — and "other special things," said Bonnie Brooks, the group's president, although the specifics have yet to be worked out.

"We'll be doing some events in the future," Brooks said, adding that there will be an opportunity for donors to name some of the facility's inside features.

"We are so grateful for the help of the city, Mayor White and Councilwoman Pam Holm, who has just done a ton of stuff to get this done," Brooks said. "So many things had to happen to get this project moved forward. It was a real collaborative effort."

She cited fellow Friends board members Brad Cutsinger, Barbara Kauffman, Ross Selvaggi, Mary Hale McLean, Diane Webb and Naomi Hewitt as vital to the effort.

Individuals interested in contributing to Friends of Neighborhood Libraries can contact Brooks at 713-385-3090. There are also collection envelopes for donations at the current library and at Encore Bank's Willowick branch office at the corner of Westheimer and Willowick.